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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 OSLO 000523

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SUBJECT: OSLO ROLLS OUT RED CARPET FOR BELARUS' MILINKEVICH

Classified By: Acting Pol/Econ Counselor Doug Apostol, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary. Belarussian presidential candidate Alexander Milinkevich's April 19-22 visit to Oslo (sponsored by the Norwegian Helsinki Committee) included high-level meetings with top Norwegian officials, numerous press activities and an afternoon coffee hosted by Ambassador and Mrs. Whitney. Milinkevich who was accompanied by his wife, Inna Kulei, former Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Sannikov and political advisor Andrei Kuselchuk, secured a Norwegian government pledge of strong political support and increased financial assistance for the Belarussian opposition. At the Ambassador's event, Milinkevich expressed appreciation for U.S. support for the Belarussian opposition and confidence that "the dictator" Lukashenko would be ousted before the end of his latest five-year term. End summary.

Norway's A-Team Meets Milinkevich
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12. (C) Berit Lindeman, Norwegian Helsinki Committee Adviser (and longtime friend of Milinkevich), told us Milinkevich was given a warm welcome by Norway's top officials. His schedule included meetings with Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg, Foreign Minister Stoere, and the Foreign Affairs Standing Committee of the Norwegian Parliament. Lindeman said that the Belarus visitors "achieved more than we hoped for," including pledges of full support for the Belarussian opposition from the Norwegian government and Parliament. Lindeman noted that the Norwegian government gave "concrete promises" to significantly increase financial support for the opposition. Prime Minister Stoltenberg also announced that Norway would follow the U.S. and EU in imposing a travel ban on 31 top Lukashenko regime officials. Stoltenberg told the press after meeting Milinkevich, "It is unacceptable that a country in Europe cannot have free elections . . . I have raised this issue with several prime ministers, among them Russia's Prime Minister Fradkov."

Ambassador's Event Sparks Lively Debate, Gets Positive Press
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13. (C) On April 21, Ambassador and Mrs. Whitney hosted an afternoon coffee in Milinkevich's honor. In addition to the Belarus visitors and members of the Helsinki Committee, the diverse list of attendees included Norwegian parliamentarians, political party leaders, members of academia and NGO representatives. Stating that democracy "requires courage and effort," the Ambassador commended Milinkevich on his efforts to foster democracy in Belarus. Speaking through a Russian interpreter, Milinkevich expressed gratitude for U.S. support, noting that the American people "were one of the first who stretched out the hand of friendship in our fight."

¶4. (C) Milinkevich referred to Lukashenko throughout the event simply as "the dictator." He was sure that Lukashenko did not really win the March 2006 election, asserting that the election results were "already determined two or three years ago." Commenting on Lukashenko's claim to 79% of the vote, Milinkevich joked that dictators do not like to receive less than 75%. In spite of the vote-rigging, Milinkevich professed to be "in a good and optimistic mood," as "almost all democratic forces were now united" against Lukashenko. He pledged that he "would not let the dictator sit for five more years."

¶5. (C) The Belarus attendees fielded questions on a broad array of topics, including youth involvement in politics, cultural identification, and Russia's role in propping up Lukashenko. Milinkevich and his colleagues spoke passionately about the European Humanitarian School and its role in preserving Belarussian language and cultural identity. Milinkevich asserted that Lukashenko sought to undermine such schools, and thereby retard a Belarus national identity, because he viewed them as a threat to his authority. Lukashenko was leading Belarus into "self-isolation," said Milinkevich.

¶6. (C) Milinkevich, Sannikov and Kuselchuk all spoke at length about Russian involvement in Belarus' affairs. Milinkevich asserted that "Russia does not see the big problem with Lukashenko" and has been comfortable with the Russia-Belarus union. He said that Russia was using Belarus as a conduit for its shady dealings with unsavory regimes. As an example, Milinkevich cited talks between the Russians and an Iranian delegate in Minsk recently, which may have focused on supplying Russian S-300 missiles and nuclear technology to Teheran. Kuselchuk thought that for the

OSLO 00000523 002 OF 002

opposition to be successful, European democracies would have to "open a dialogue with Russia" on Belarus to persuade Moscow to drop its support for "Europe's last dictatorship."

¶7. (SBU) The Ambassador and Milinkevich sat down with Norwegian TV and print reporters following the event. Media coverage was prominent and positive. A nearly two minute long television news report on Milinkevich's visit led off with footage from the coffee event and quoted the Ambassador extensively. Print media reports were equally favorable. Visit Oslo's Classified website:
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/eur/oslo/index.cf m>

WHITNEY